

NOLAN AT BALAKLAVA: A REPLY

by Dr. Douglas J. Austin 07 [TWC 24(2) p7 2006]

I refer to Major Colin Robins' article '*Nolan did try to re-direct the Light Brigade - Who Says?*' in the April 2006 issue of this journal (Vol 24(1), p 7), because the issues raised exemplify some of the many problems facing historians. It is a misconception, for example, to assert that so-called 'scientific standards' can apply to the interpretation of written accounts, whether contemporary or not. Such accounts may well be prejudiced, in error or fabricated (the same applies to our own interpretations). From 40 years' experience, I maintain that the essential criteria of true scientific method include objective and reproducible observations. We cannot reproduce historical events and those criteria, therefore, do not apply.

I warmly agree that Mark Adkin's book '*The Charge: The Real Reason why the Light Brigade was lost.*' - in the 2004 '150th Anniversary Edition' (enhanced by Major Robins and David Cliff of CWRS) - is, for the moment, the best account of '*The Charge*', although it is not error-free. Improvement on that account is certainly not impossible. It cannot, in any case, be the final definitive description of the event because, at any time, further information may emerge from hitherto unpublished archives. For example, Mei Trow's new book '*The Pocket Hercules*' (Pen & Sword Books, 2006) uses the hitherto unknown Morris family papers to include some 60 pages about the Crimean War, including many details of the Charge of the Light Brigade. On page 120 of that book. Captain Morris (17th Lancers) writes simply that 'Poor Captain Nolan was shot dead close to me - he was a gallant fellow'.

Nolan's attempt at re-direction was a fleeting episode before the most notorious bungle in the history of British cavalry and, to our present knowledge, was not recorded in 1854. Both Adkin and Major Robins consider that to be some sort of 'evidence' that the attempt did not occur - a conclusion I firmly dispute. I believe that too much emphasis has been laid on Henry 'Fitz' Maxse's letter to '*The Times*' for July 28, 1868, in which he stated his '*impression that Captain Nolan . . . intended to charge the guns we did charge, and no other. I have no recollection of his divergence in the manner described by Mr. Kinglake either by deed or gesture until after he was struck; then his horse took the line pointed out by Mr. Kinglake.*' That circumstance was not mentioned in Maxse's brief letter to his mother dated October 28, 1854. It is entirely conceivable that his '*impression*' and his '*recollection*' were mistaken after almost 14 years. His further description, in an 1868 letter to his brother, of the idea of an attempted re-direction as '*absurd*' emphasises his belief, but has no element of proof about it. I note that there was no contemporary or later confirmation (or denial) of his published letter, which appears to have been ignored at the time. I place no special significance on Maxse's letters.

Major Robins' statement (consistent with Adkin) that there was '*no mention of the supposed action of Nolan until Kinglake completed his volume on Balaklava some twelve years later*' is certainly incorrect. Kinglake did not '*start this rumour*' because we read in Woods' '*Campaign in the Crimea*', Vol II page 82 (published in 1855), that '*...Nolan spurred far in advance of all, as if leading; and as the first gun was fired, waved his sword and cheered... To this day it is the belief of our officers that, with the first glance at the enemy's preparations, Nolan saw the Light Brigade was doomed, and with his last faint actions strove to turn them from the inevitable destruction on which they were rushing.*' (I thank Rod Robinson for this information.) Furthermore, its essentials appeared in Edward H. Nolan's '*History of the War against Russia*', which that author began writing in 1855 - not long after the event. There, in Vol 1, pp 546-547 (1857), we read - concerning Captain Nolan - '*Many various accounts have been given of the way he fell. He has been generally*

represented as leading the brigade when he received his deathblow. Lord Cardigan has denied this, and stated that Nolan was not leading the brigade, but a considerable distance on the general's right, and in advance. In this case both accounts are true. There is no doubt that the intrepid horseman was far in advance...but he fell before the actual charge commenced, and while (just as Lord Cardigan represented) his horse was prancing about...So far from Lord Cardigan wishing to deprecate Captain Nolan, he has vindicated his memory; and, when living, showed his confidence and respect by offering to place him on his own staff. The writer of this narrative has these facts from the lips of the noble earl himself, who could have no motive, unless it were a personal courtesy, in deviating from the sternest matter of truth in the case.'

Major Robins makes much of Kinglake's friendship with Raglan - and his later commission to generate the history of part of the Crimean War - to discredit Kinglake as a historian and, by extension, his account of this incident in '*The Invasion of the Crimea*' (1868, Vol IV, pp 255ff), as read by Maxse. The main text states '*Right before him he saw Nolan audaciously riding across his front from left to right...turning round in his saddle ... shouting, and waving his sword as though he would address the brigade*'. Cardigan's Plan, shown in facsimile facing p 210, shows Nolan's final location ahead and to the right (south) of the Light Brigade advance. The printed map, facing p 252, shows Nolan's route towards the Causeway Heights and, in particular, Redoubt 3. In footnotes, Kinglake reproduces a diagram, perhaps provided by Cardigan, and specifically states that Cardigan '*in writing addressed to myself, distinctly confirmed the statements which show that Nolan was riding diagonally across the front of the brigade*' (his italics). So convinced was Kinglake himself that (pace Maxse) he repeated his original version - without alteration - down to the final edition (1889, Vol V, pp 217ff.). Why should we treat those data as fabrications? Maxse's letters, considered in isolation, offer no compelling reason to reject Kinglake's account.

On p 83 of the account of the Charge published by Albert Mitchell (13th Light Dragoons) in 1884, we read '*...almost before we had struck into a gallop, poor Captain Nolan (who rode in front of our regiment) was struck by a piece of shell which burst near him. He uttered a fearful cry; at the same time his horse turned about and made for the rear through our squadron interval.*'

I conclude that Nolan started from the 17th Lancers on the left and was killed on the right of the advance, i.e., that he rode across the brigade front. Furthermore - and with no possible Kinglake connection - on p 160 of George Shuldharn Peard's book '*Narrative of a Campaign in the Crimea*', completed in April, 1855, we read '*Captain Nolan was killed by almost the first shot from the enemy in front of the Hussars.*', which I take to mean that Nolan's body fell to the ground in front of the 8th Hussars after passing through the 13th Light Dragoons. To my knowledge, those statements - which accord with Kinglake's account - went unchallenged.

I question Major Robins' comment that the route from the Light Brigade's starting place to '*both destinations*' was the same, when the second '*destination*' could have been via not the Causeway Heights but rather via the South Valley, as suggested by Colonel Tremayne (13th Light Dragoons) in his '*Crimean Notes*'.

In the Crimea, Evelyn Wood was commissioned Cornet in the 13th Dragoons in September, 1855, when he was just over 17½ years old, and was promoted to Lieutenant in February 1856. He later served with the 17th Lancers during the Indian Mutiny. He contributed regularly to military periodicals and published seven books, the last being '*Winnowed Memories*' (1918). As regards Balaklava, I (for one) accept his statement that he '*had many opportunities of hearing at first hand not only of the incidents of that glorious half-hour...*' Those opportunities would have begun within 12 months of the event. The fact that his record of those accounts only reached print in 1896 offers no firm reason to dismiss it.

I continue to lend considerable weight to his assertion that ‘*Shortly after it advanced, Captain Nolan was seen galloping across the front, shouting, and pointing to the Causeway Heights with his sword.*’ Later still, in 1915, Evelyn Wood edited two volumes of ‘*British Battles on Land and Sea*’ published by James Grant in many editions from 1873 to 1904. In Volume II of Wood’s edition of that work, we read on p 562 ‘*It is clear from Captain Nolan’s subsequent action that he understood Lord Raglan’s intentions, for starting from the left of the regiment in front line of the attack - i.e. 17th Lancers - he rode diagonally across Lord Cardigan’s front as the peer in the centre of the brigade led straight down the valley, shouting and waving his sword. As he crossed before the 13th Light Dragoons, the right-hand regiment, he was riding towards the redoubts whence the Russians were trying to remove the guns abandoned by the Turks, and when some short distance to Lord Cardigan’s right front a shell splinter carried away part of his chest, though his body remained in the saddle and the sword high in the air.*’

Despite Major Robins’ further comment, I continue to maintain that, in the emergency of a clearly near-suicidal advance, Cardigan (wisely enough) delegated the command of the Light Brigade’s second line to Lord George Paget - whatever conventional military practice might prescribe.

To reject the very concept of an attempted re-direction by Captain Nolan, we are asked to conclude that George Peard, Nicholas Woods, Edward Nolan, Alexander Kinglake, Albert Mitchell and Evelyn Wood were all parties to error and/or fabrication and that only Maxse’s statements are definitive. That is emphatically not the conclusion I choose to draw. I trust that decisive information will one day emerge. Everything depends, as ever, on what we select as evidence and, after its appraisal, what we regard as proof.